

Georgia Department of Human Resources

FOSTER CARE IN GEORGIA

Foster care is a state program that provides temporary substitute homes for children who have been abused or neglected by their families. It is one of the many programs administered by the Georgia Department of Human Resources' Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS).

Children in foster care

As of July 2003, about 14,481 children were in state custody. The majority of these were in care by order of the juvenile court, which is the only authority, aside from a parent or guardian, which can place a child in DFCS custody. Of these:

- 7,925 were in family foster care;
- 657 were placed in child-caring institutions or hospitals;
- 1,312 were in group homes;
- 2,861 were placed with relatives or were in the non-abusing parents' home until the court could decide legal custody;
- 426 children were in foster care with relatives;
- 463 children were free for adoption and placed in adoptive homes.

Of the youngsters in DFCS custody, about 857 are served in intensive, intermediate, or therapeutic settings because they need treatment for serious emotional problems.

The ages of children in DFCS custody range from birth to 21; the average age is about 9. Some 44 percent are white, and 51 percent are African-American. The remaining 5 percent come from other ethnic backgrounds.

Some children remain in foster care throughout their teen years. Nearly 3,992 youth are eligible to receive services through the Independent Living Program, a transition program that prepares teens ages 14-21 for independence and adulthood.

About 854 DFCS case managers work with birth families on meeting goals outlined in case plans for reunification, select and place the child in a suitable home or other placement option, and ensure that the case is reviewed in a timely manner.

The state is required to have a permanency plan for all children within 12 months after a child comes into care. Options may include reunification, placement with other relatives or a guardian, adoption or another permanent living alternative. Currently, children remain in foster care for an average of one year and seven months and most return to their birth families.

Foster parents

Foster parents are recruited primarily by county DFCS staff. As of July 2003, there were about 3,642 family foster homes in Georgia.

Foster parents provide only temporary care for children, but if a foster child becomes available for adoption, foster parents often adopt the child. In fact, foster parents account for more than 80 percent of DFCS adoptions.

Prospective foster parents must complete pre-service training. Physical exams, drug screens, and criminal record checks are required. Homes also must meet other safety

requirements. Foster parents complete parent development training and a re-evaluation every year.

The number of children placed in a home varies from one to six (including the parents' own children), and is predetermined by the parent and the DFCS agency. Foster parents are reimbursed according to the age of the child: birth to 5, \$12.75; 6-12, \$13.50; 13 and above, \$14.25. The rate is higher for children needing medical care or a higher level of supervision. Medical treatment and clothing costs are covered by the agency.

A toll-free foster parent support and information line (1-888-310-8260) is available for foster parents and others wanting information about Georgia's foster care program. The foster care and adoption recruitment intake line is 1-877-210-KIDS.

Foster care reviews

Many citizens take an active role in Georgia's foster care program by serving on a Citizens Review Panel. Panel members, who are appointed by a Juvenile or Superior Court judge, review agency case plans for children and make sure that they find permanent homes as quickly as possible. In some counties, a judge does the case review. CASA volunteers (Court-Appointed Special Advocates) act on behalf of the court in representing the best interests of children in care during the judicial process.

Safe and Stable Families

This program provides federal funding, training and technical assistance to community based nonprofit organizations to help vulnerable families stay together. Assistance includes services to improve parental parenting skills, help families in crisis, and reunify families whose children have been placed in foster care. When children cannot be safely reunited with their families, the program works with county DFCS and communities to smooth the adoption process.

Program services are delivered through a coordinated network of 170 local agencies located throughout the state in a variety of family accessible settings, such as schools, family resource centers, county DFCS offices, domestic violence shelters, hospitals, churches and family visitation centers. Last year, 12,955 families were served.